

South Sudanese will overcome evil with good, say Irish Missionaries



Irish missionaries in South Sudan reflect on the first few days following the shocking attack on Rumbek's bishop-elect, writes **Ruadhán Jones**

There is a mixture of fear and hope in the diocese of Rumbek, South Sudan, after the shooting of Bishop-designate Christian Carlassare, according to Irish missionaries in the region. As the police work for justice, medical missionary Noeleen Loughran and missionary priest Fr Alan Neville MSC believe that the bishop's commitment to work for "justice with mercy" will be key to healing the fissures that have emerged within the community.

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At 2am on Monday April 26, Noeleen Loughran was one of a number of people in the diocese of Rumbek contacted by local authorities. They were seeking a blood donor for Rumbek's bishop-designate, who had been shot in the legs by unknown assailants that night. The bishop's attackers confronted him in his house, breaking down his door before shooting him four times and leaving him for dead. Bishop-designate Carlassare was taken to hospital, where many people gathered in support and were relieved to hear that he was alive.

Ms Loughran – who has been working in South Sudan for almost a decade – said the shooting hit the community hard.

“It's terrible,” says Ms Loughran, an Irish missionary nurse in the region. “This is Friday (April 30) and we can't put together the disappointment, the shock and fear; the whole thing is just terrible. People were just completely – there were hundreds of people at the hospital, the police and the army and everyone was here.

“Even one of the priests that I work here with has taken ill with the anxiety. Many people have taken ill over it. It's just the confusion of it all. They feel pain, the people feel pain. This is the first time in 11 years they've been able to have a bishop because of the violence. The bishop was only here since Holy Thursday (April 1) and he was shot.”

Following the shooting, police arrested 12 people in connection with the crime, including three priests and several laypeople prominent in Rumbek. Many of them were integral to the running of the diocese, Ms Loughran says, adding that the diocese is almost “completely shut down now because the people involved were running the diocese. It's just completely collapsed”.

Perpetrators

“The president of South Sudan sent a letter, he is adamant to find the perpetrators of this,” Ms Loughran explains. “The government themselves have really acted quickly, which is very unusual here. But really it's not over yet because the family of the people who are now arrested and in jail.

They may rebel. We're very unsure what may happen. The bishop-elect is doing relatively well, he had surgery last night. He'll not be able to walk for some months, but he's insisting that he will come back.”

Due to the insecurity of the situation, Ms Loughran had considered leaving the country following the shooting. But “because the bishop is so strong and upbeat, that we can still help the people and don't leave the people in time of need”, Ms Loughran decided to stay.

Fr Alan Neville, a Sacred Heart missionary who has been in Rumbek since November 2020, says that while the immediate effect of the attack has been unease and insecurity in the community, he believes the response of the bishop-designate, the state and the people can be a source of reconciliation and solidarity.



Italian-born Bishop-designate Christian Carlassare, who was shot by gunmen in Rumbek, South Sudan, speaks from a hospital in Nairobi, Kenya, in a video message posted April 28, on Twitter.

“There would have to be a sense of unease, that would have to be there,” Fr Neville says. “But that's what these things are designed to do. Whenever you look at these things, it's either people who are overcome by greed or it's people who want to create a climate of uncertainty. My feeling would be that if anything it has done the opposite, because the amount of people who have rallied around, the amount of people who have spoken in support.”

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In the Western media, Fr Neville continues, the attack has been reduced to a tribal or ethnic struggle. This isn't the case, he maintains, calling it a “lazy narrative”.

“What you have here are people who are greedy, just off the wall behaviour,” Fr Neville says. “We have this thing in the west, reducing it to a tribal thing or an ethnic thing – that's not the case here at all. And certainly what I would say to you is, when we were at the hospital on the Monday, the amount of people who came to show their solidarity – all the parishioners who came, the governor was there. He was there before the crack of dawn with his entire cabinet. They were thinking, this is not who we are.

Incredible rigour

“From my experience, the people here are very welcoming. Yes, it was a shock – there's a challenge around insecurity certainly – but this was shocking for everybody. Not only the governor but the president came out and gave a very strongly worded statement. And they are pursuing



Irish medical missionary Noeleen Loughran, who ministers to a community of lepers in South Sudan.

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the case with incredible rigour.”

The response of the bishop-designate, who made a statement from his hospital bed following surgery, has given hope to the Catholic community, Fr Neville says.

“Bishop Carlassare, he's an incredible guy,” Fr Neville says. “First off he forgave the people who attacked him and then he said – and this is him lying in bed after surgery – the people of Rumbek don't deserve this. He says they're very much with him.

“And the message has remained consistent, very much a message of reconciliation and justice. But also solidarity with the people here.

When people say, is he going to come back? He says he'll be back as quickly as he can. He's the bishop-elect here at the moment, he's not the bishop just yet. But once he is, I think he's going to be extraordinary.”

While uncertainty continues following the shooting, Fr Neville is hopeful that some good will come of it: “How we are responding to what is a difficult situation – the bishop and the people who have been here a great length of time – you can't help but be hopeful. People are living out the message of Romans 12:21 – ‘Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’”